Cambodia's Phum Trea as Mirror Image of Religious Change

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The village of Phum Trea, located in rural Kampong Cham province, has long been known as the spiritual centre of Cambodia's Muslim minority, the Chams. As such, the religious currents in Phum Trea reflect broader trends of religious change in the region. In fact, many of these currents have manifested themselves most visibly in Phum Trea and its vicinity. Apart from presenting an overview of major developments within Cambodian Islam, this article argues that certain developments, such as the arrival of Islamic modernism and the emergence of Tablighi Jamaat as a locally relevant mass movement, exemplify the traditionalist reaction to other currents of Islamic internationalism, currents that are presently reshaping Cambodian Islam.

Situated on the west bank of the Mekong less than 50 kilometres north of the provincial capital of Kampong Cham, Phum Trea is only accessible by boat or mopeds using muddy, and during rainy season hardly traversable, pathways. However, the visitor, after stepping from the ferry and walking past typical wooden houses on stilts, is soon struck by the sight of Cambodia's largest mosque. Given its modest surroundings, the huge white building makes a strong impression, albeit appearing slightly out of place. In fact, in many other rural Cham villages in Cambodia, the recently built mosques, replacing their mostly wooden predecessors (most of which were destroyed during Khmer Rouge rule), are the only concrete buildings to be seen. Yet, none of these can match Phum Trea's mosque which has recently replaced Phnom Penh's Arab-financed International Dubai Mosque as the largest place of Muslim worship in deeply Buddhist Cambodia.

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The village's location in Kampong Cham province is crucial, as eastern Cambodia was always the country's Cham stronghold. Even today, around a third of the greater than 400,000 Cham Muslims reside in this province along the banks of the Mekong. Even though, or perhaps because, it is so far removed from the Cham agglomerations in several suburbs of Phnom Penh, Phum Trea has maintained its status as the Chams' spiritual centre, a position which was already noticed by the early French ethnographers.

Islamic values and the appearance of Islamic modernism

Whereas, since the relocation of the court from Oudong to Penh Penh in the 1860s at the latest, the highest Muslim dignitaries were residing in Chruy Changvar in the proximity of the court, religious authority was traditionally wielded by the most eminent teachers (sg. *guru*). Indeed, in the 1930s neither Chruy Changvar nor An Giang in modern-day Vietnam—both renowned centres of Islamic learning among the Chams—could match the prominence of Phum Trea with its foremost Mecca-educated teacher Hajji Osman. By then, the latter had allegedly already taught generations of students from all over the country.

Predominantly due to Malay influence, in the 1930s the Cambodian Chams were engaged in heated discussions regarding the details of proper religious observance. Even though the same period also witnessed fierce opposition between the religious establishment and adherents of Islamic reformism influenced by Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida (*kaum tua* – new group) mainly in the Dutch East Indies and the British Straits Settlements, the nature of the Chams' disagreements was still more fundamental. Perhaps these can most profitably be compared to the antagonisms between observant Muslims (*santri*) and *abangan* or Javanists in Java. Indeed, among the Chams, the split was caused by discussions revolving around the basic tenets of Islam, such as the number of daily prayers. Within these debates the language of religious instruction was of crucial importance: the representatives of traditional distinct Cham Islam insisted on the use of rudimentary Arabic and Cham language, as preserved in Cham manuscripts; whereas a new generation of scholars, partly educated in Kelantan or Patani, came to rely on Malay language and materials for their religious instruction.[1] Eventually Malayization prevailed over Cham Islam. Yet, the latter has survived as a distinct minority within the Cambodian Chams (at times referred to as *Jahed*), whose leader, like the majority's grand mufti, has been awarded an honorific title by the Cambodian king.[2] Naturally Phum Tria and its Hajji Osman must have played an instrumental role in the advance of more orthodox teachings. The mentioned controversies among the Chams were not yet associated with the spread of Islamic modernism in Southeast Asia. However, as a major demand of the latter reform movement was not only the improvement of religious instruction, but also the introduction of mixed curricula featuring secular subjects, it is important to note that Phum Tria housed Hajji Osman's famous madrasa as well as a similarly renowned religious school, the first among the Cham community to rely on such a mixed curriculum.

Eventually in the 1950s, reformists educated in modern religious schools in Kelantan and Patani (and in certain instances even India), also came to criticize allegedly un-Islamic and backward practices in Cambodia. Elsewhere these purification campaigns led to intra-community strife. In Kroch Chmar village (located in Phum Trea's neighbouring district), the activities of two reformist imams, who had returned from studies abroad, created dissension and ultimately led to violence. In response, the government chose to have both imams deported from Cambodia in 1960.[3]

Phum Trea as Cambodia's Tablighi Jamaat stronghold

Beginning in the 1960s, the impact of foreign influences, so decisive for the developments within the Cambodian Cham community outlined above, was sharply reduced, and eventually petered out altogether over the following decade. Indeed, with the beginning of the second Indochina war in 1964, it became increasingly difficult to maintain foreign contacts. Civil war and US bombing in Cambodia in the first half of the 1970s worsened the situation; and Khmer Rouge rule, from 1975-1979, led to the almost complete physical elimination of Cham religious scholars and leadership as well as to the destruction of most religious infrastructure, and the death of a large portion of the Cham population.[4] Obviously, these were not times destined for major developments within the religious community. Due to armed resistance by the remnants of the Khmer Rouge, notwithstanding the return of Cham refugees, this state of affairs continued throughout the 1980s. Yet, at

the same time, the first trickle of small-scale international Islamic aid started to arrive from the Islamic Development Bank and private businessmen based in Dubai. Such developments foreshadowed important changes in the 1990s and beyond.

During the 1980s, urban Chams actively sought attachment to and aid from the wider Muslim world; by the early 1990s, the number of foreign contacts was on the rise again, and soon reached an unprecedented level.[5] Significantly, since the 1993 elections, numerous Saudi-Arabian, Kuwaiti, and Malaysian NGOs have built mosques, schools, and orphanages in Cambodia, and, in doing so, have exerted considerable influence on the face of Cham Islam in Cambodia. During the UN peace-keeping mission from early 1992 to summer 1993, Kampong Cham province and Phum Trea were located in the Indian sector and, strikingly, the *da'wa* (or *dakwa*) movement, Tablighi Jamaat, with its Indian roots had just started to gain notoriety in the area.

The movement first made its appearance in Cambodia in 1989, when the far-travelled Imam Sulaiman Ibrahim returned to Cambodia after almost two decades abroad. After his flight from Cambodia he studied in, among other places, Medina and Malaysia, where he first came into contact with the *dakwa* movement. In the following years, he visited affiliated institutions in India and South Thailand. Upon returning, he set out to spread the movement's message in his homeland, and in addition to the mandatory preaching missions, he taught in the village of Chumnik, situated like Phum Trea in Kampong Cham's Kroch Chhmar district. However, as Sulaiman's teachings quickly drew large numbers of students, he relocated to Phum Trea in 1992, where he built a large madrasa with donations from Malaysian supporters and exile Chams.

With its strong sense of community coupled with an emphasis on individual piety and activism, the movement spread rapidly among the Cambodian Chams, and by now has 20 provincial chapters. It seems that it is exactly this form of community mobilization with its focus on personal religious observance instead of forced efforts to come to terms with the demands of contemporary Cambodian realities, which accounts for the movement's mass appeal. The Tablighi Jamaat's character of a mass movement within Cambodian Islam is most obvious in the large crowds of people spending Thursday nights at associated mosques, when itinerant preachers are holding sermons. Perhaps an even more visible sign of Tablighi influence is constituted by their particular style of dress, namely long white robes and turbans, which stands in marked contrast to the traditional Cham attire of *sarong* and white skullcap, or the western dress of many urban Chams. This contrast is even more noticeable in respect to women's dress: while, since the early 1990s, Cham women have increasingly donned the hijab, it is predominantly in villages with a strong Tablighi influence, that one sees completely veiled women. Such attire was unknown in Cambodia until recently.

Despite its origination as an offshoot of the Indian reformist Deobandi movement, the Tablighi Jamaat appears in Cambodia with a distinctively Malay and traditionalist face. Foreign itinerant preachers are often Malays from South Thailand, and thus share a common background with the Chams, both belonging to a Muslim minority in a predominantly Buddhist country. Moreover, the Tablighis' ostentatiously Islamic style of dress stands in marked contrast to the Western costume mostly worn by representatives of Arab or Malay NGOs as well as by figures of the Malaysian political spectrum (either UMNO or PAS), who are similarly visiting Cambodia to aid the Chams.

Due to its emergence as a centre for Tablighi activities, Phum Trea has also regained its role as spiritual centre, at least as far as rural Cambodia is concerned. Although the centrally located mosque of Prek Prah in Phnom Penh is referred to as the focal point of the movement in Cambodia, it is beyond doubt that Phum Trea reigns supreme in terms of popular appeal. After all, it houses Cambodia's largest mosque and Tablighi madrasa; the latter draws students from all over the country and is staffed mostly by Chams educated in Southern Thai schools that are affiliated with the movement. Phum Trea also enjoys the presence of Imam Sulaiman. Moreover, situated in the historical Cham stronghold of Cambodia at some distance from the Khmer centres, its location is also an advantage as it lends support to its claim to be at the heart of "pure" Islamic learning. Similarly, the local strength of the movement serves to compensate for the relative neglect of the rural Chams by foreign charities and the politically active "big power" Muslims. Generally the Tablighi centres appear to be self-sufficient communities focused on the preservation and cultivation of Islamic and Cham identity. The continuing appeal of the movement testifies to the successful implementation of these directives.

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Cambodian boy leaves a mosque closed down for alleged links with Jemaah Islamiyah.

However, this new wave of religious change has also been criticized. The movement has been opposed by modernist Muslims as well as villagers, both of whom view its sectarian character with suspicion. Whereas Cham NGOs such as the Cambodian Muslim Development Foundation as well as Arab charities are promoting both religious and secular education, interaction with the Khmer majority, and participation in politics, with its mostly rural and suburban base, the Tablighi Jamaat is steering a potentially isolationist course by emphasizing religious education alone after primary school as the best means to avoid Khmerization.

The arising conflicts are strongly reminiscent of clashes between modernists and traditionalists in the preceding century. In both instances, such clashes have brought about the division of entire villages, as mosques and schools have been fought over. Often, the situation can only be resolved through the establishment of parallel structures. Similarly, Sulaiman's attempt to monopolize worship in Phum Trea's huge mosque, built with donations from local and exile Chams, and according to certain reports also with financing from Pakistan, was met with opposition. Consequently, the construction of small, independent mosques in the proximity of their giant counterpart was already begun before the completion of the latter.

Today the fates of the Tablighi Jamaat in Cambodia and Phum Trea are closely intertwined, and the future of the latter appears heavily dependent on that of the former. However, given the Tablighi movement's mass appeal among the rural Chams, an instrumental role in future developments within Cambodian Islam will certainly be accorded to Phum Trea. Nevertheless, as with the case of a similar *dakwa* group in Malaysia (namely the Darul Arqam), it is very likely that the movement will soon gain ground among urban Chams of the middle and higher strata of society. This, in turn, could lead to a rethinking of Tablighi efforts regarding the capital. Similarly, the expanding network of modern Muslim schools under the direction of modern oriented Cham NGOs into the rural areas may decrease the demand for the purely religious education espoused and championed by the Tablighis.

Notes

1. On observations of the Cambodian Chams in the 1930s see Marcel Ner, "Les musulmans de l'Indochine Française," *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient* 41(1941): 165–200.
2. See Agnès *De Féo*, "Les Chams sot, dissidence de l'islam cambodgien," *Les Cahiers de l'Orient* 78 (2005): 115–124.
3. See William Collins, *The Chams of Cambodia* (Phnom Penh: Centre for Advanced Studies, 1996), 73–75.
4. See Ben Kiernan, "Orphans of Genocide: The Cham Muslims of Kampuchea under Pol Pot," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 20, no. 4 (1988): 1–33; Ysa Osman, *Oukoubah: Justice for the Cham Muslims under the Democratic Kampuchea Regime* (Phnom Penh: Documentation Centre of Cambodia, 2002).
5. For a more detailed account see Philipp Bruckmayr, "The Cham Muslims of Cambodia: From Forgotten Minority to Focal Point of Islamic Internationalism," *AJISS* 23, no. 3 (2006): 1–23.

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